

Knowledge

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In the Name of Allâh, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful

by AB Khan

From an Islamic point of view, any discussion of knowledge and the importance of acquiring knowledge must begin with a consideration of what we mean by the term knowledge. As a learned scholar of Islam has recently written,

'Indeed the virtues and merits of knowledge (`ilm) are well known to everyone. It is the most noble thing one can ask for, and the best thing a striver can seek to attain. Knowledge consists of many branches, but according to the scholars of Islam: "What is meant by knowledge in the absolute sense is Islamic knowledge."

This is the intended meaning of knowledge in the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of His Messenger. In the absolute sense, it is knowledge regarding Allah, His names and attributes, knowledge of His rights over His creation, and what He, the One free from all defects, the Most High, has prescribed for them. It is the detailed knowledge of the path that leads to Allah; knowledge of the purpose of our creation; and the end which the slave will result in, in the Hereafter.

This Islamic knowledge is the best of sciences worth acquiring because through it Allah is recognized and acknowledged, and by it He is worshipped. One who possesses this knowledge knows what Allah has made lawful for him and what He has prohibited him from; what pleases Him and what evokes His anger. With this knowledge a person knows his result with Allah and his end...' ("Knowledge", Al-Hidaayah, 1995, p.4)

Thus, the Islamic understanding of knowledge pertains to knowledge about Allah swt. This knowledge, of His names and attributes, is generally referred to as 'aqeedah (belief). Connected to this is the understanding of the purpose and obligations that Allah swt has assigned to human existence. Again related to this is knowledge of Arabic, fiqh, hadeeth and hadeeth methodology, the life of the Prophet, and Islamic history since all of these areas of study, given the proper approach and application, ultimately assist in the strengthening of aqeedah.

Knowledge precedes faith. How can one have faith without knowing what it is that one has faith in? The example of the convert illustrates this. Generally, those who voluntarily enter Islam from other religions and belief-systems do so once they have acquired the knowledge and reached the understanding that Islam is the faith and the way of life to which they would like to adhere.

The Qur'an is clear with respect to the preferred rank, in the eyes of Allah, of those who possess the substantive knowledge described above. "Say: 'Are those who know equal to those who know not?' It is only men of understanding who will remember (that is get a lesson from Allah's signs)." [Az-Zumar, 39:9] Also, "Shall he then who knows that what has been revealed unto you (O Muhammad) from your Lord is the truth be like him who is blind? But it is only the men of understanding that pay heed." [Ar-Ra'd, 13:19]. Clearly, the person who has knowledge of Allah swt is not equal to the person who does not. Those who have the knowledge are aware of the truth and act accordingly, thereby having a beneficial impact on those around them whereas those who are ignorant fumble through the world, vainly attempting to satisfy their desires, following Shaytan, and ultimately failing to gain consciousness of their purpose and duty in this life. It should be clear that knowledge is a means to an end. The Muslim who acquires knowledge, if he or she is sincere, does so essentially for three purposes. The first is to build aqeedah and taqwa, that is to say, belief in, and consciousness of, Allah. Secondly, and this obviously follows from the first, the Muslim acquires knowledge in order to practice and implement what he or she has learned. Thirdly, a Muslim who gains knowledge then has a duty to share it with others and invite others towards Allah and His messenger. In a sense, these are not three distinct purposes but all connected branches of the single purpose in acquiring knowledge which ought to be the seeking of the pleasure of Allah. According to a hadeeth reported by Abu Huraira, the Messenger of Allah is reported to have said that "He who does not acquire knowledge with the sole intention of seeking the pleasure of Allah, and does not impart it but for the gains of this world would not smell the scent of Paradise on the Day of Resurrection (reported in Ahmad, Abu Dawud, Ibn Majah). In this respect, as in everything having to do with Islam, sincerity is key. Sincerity in the acquisition and application of knowledge is critical to achieving success in this world and the hereafter.

Consider the hadeeth reported by Abu Hurairah, who heard the Messenger say, "...[Another] will be a man who has acquired knowledge ('ilm) and has taught it and who used to recite the Qur'an. He will be brought (on the Day of Judgement) and Allah will make known to him His favours and he will acknowledge them. [The Almighty] will say: And what did you do about them? He will say: I studied knowledge and taught it and recited the Qur'an for your sake. He (Allah) will say: You have lied - you did but acquire knowledge that it might be said [of you]: He is learned. You recited the Qur'an that it might be said [of you]: He is a reciter. And so it was said. Then he will be ordered to be dragged along on his face until he is cast into the Hellfire..." (Muslim, at-Tirmidhee, an-Nasaa'ee) Thus those who acquire knowledge and who, either in its acquisition or application or both, engage in *riyaa* (showing off) face the potential of a grave punishment (no pun intended). They will be the first in the Fire.

(Somewhat tangentially, with respect to sincerity, what springs to mind is the insincerity of the Orientalists. These are individuals who have devoted their lives to the study of one aspect of Islam or another, but who, as a result of their insincerity, remain among the ranks of the *kuffar*, this despite their having greater factual understanding of Islam than perhaps the vast majority of Muslims).

Having pointed out the meaning of knowledge and its purpose, it should be emphasized that the source of this knowledge must clearly be the Qur'an and Sunnah and the writings of the pious scholars who have adhered closely to the two original sources. The importance of the Qur'an and Sunnah as sources of authentic knowledge is well understood by most. However, a cause of considerable distortion and confusion among Muslims and non-Muslims today is the fact that there exist many writers (both Muslim and non-Muslim) who, in producing different works on Islam, depart from the original sources and the understanding of those sources evinced by the *sahaabah* and their pious successors. If we accept that the *sahaabah* and their successors, according to the hadeeth of the Prophet s.a.w., were the best of generations, and the fact that they directly experienced or were most closely connected to the life of the Prophet s.a.w., it should be clear that we must seek out those writings and interpretations that stick most closely to their understanding of the deen.

Especially in this part of the world, acquiring authentic knowledge is a serious struggle. It requires time, money and effort. Alhamdulillah, we are in a period where an ever-increasing number of superb books and audio-cassettes (in English) on all aspects of Islam are becoming available through local mosques, bookstores and other agencies. Thus what is the main aspect of the struggle to gain knowledge really has to do with the time and effort that we put in. We need only consider the amount of energy we put into the study of worldly subjects - engineering, hard sciences, social studies, business - to realize the imbalance that exists in our approach. No one is questioning the fact that we all need to study engineering or commerce or other such subjects in order to earn a living. This is clearly a must. Moreover, Muslims ought to do their best in order to be among the top-ranking students in all of these areas. However, it is a greater duty and obligation upon each of us to sacrifice a certain quantity and quality of time and energy in order to achieve an increasing level of consciousness of Allah. We should all have the intention to learn Arabic, memorize parts of the Qur'an and the Hadeeth, comprehend the life of the Prophet s.a.w. and deepen our understanding of the basic pillars. This requires consistent effort, discipline and commitment. In the end, if we are clear that it is only this type of knowledge - knowledge about Allah, about the Qur'an and Sunnah - that will ultimately be of value to us on the Last Day, then the effort and commitment required should not be difficult to generate.

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